



PC Builder

If you like the idea of being able to see track and DVD information on your PC without looking at the main display, you can install your own LCD readout. Chris Finnamore explains how it's done



Q Can an LCD readout be used to display any other information, apart from track names and suchlike?

A LCD readouts aren't just for media centre PCs. The iMon VFD can show extra information about your PC or from the internet. The iMon VFD's extra functions are accessed through its VFD Control Panel utility. When you leave the display in Auto mode, the iMon will cycle through its various functions until you play a media file, but you can force it to display only a certain type of information.

The news mode connects to a news server and displays the latest headlines from around the world, and can be set to check for news every one, two, three, six or 12 hours. The city mode displays weather information and temperatures from every major world city, and you can create a customised list of cities to display.

The VFD also has an email check mode. Once you have entered your POP3 server name, username and password, it will automatically log in to your email server and tell you how many new messages you have. The System Information mode displays a variety of information about your PC, from the processor type and speed to your free RAM and hard disk space, as well as your IP address.

There are many advantages to storing all your media on your PC. Huge CD and DVD collections take up a lot of space and organising your collection can take a great deal of time. Hard disk-stored media files are easy to organise and search, and you can keep them all in one place without swapping discs all the time.

One problem with using a PC for all your media, rather than a dedicated CD or DVD player, is that you don't get a dedicated LCD for displaying chapter, time and track information. The only way you can normally view this information is either to bring your audio player application to the foreground or turn on the information display for your DVD player application.

If you'd rather have this information to hand, then don't worry, as we'll show you how to fit a small LCD to your PC that does exactly this. Another benefit of fitting your own screen is that you can switch off your main display when you're listening to music and still see what's going on.

This month we'll show you how to fit two such displays. The first, iMatrix Orbital's MX630 (£76 from www.kustompcs.co.uk), is designed to be used with Windows XP Media Center Edition (MCE), so you'll need a PC running this operating system in order to use it. As such it doesn't come with its own remote control.

The second display we've looked at, iMon's VFD (£80 from www.quietpc.com), provides its own media management software and a remote control along with the screen. It's an excellent choice if you're building a media PC from scratch.

Our step-by-step guide shows you how to install each product. There are separate steps for each product, so read only the section that applies to your hardware. To install either product using our instructions you'll need a PC with a free 5¼" drive bay and a free internal USB header (consult your motherboard's manual to find the latter).

MATRIX ORBITAL MX630

1 The MX630 is designed to be mounted in a 5¼" optical drive bay. It only needs to be connected to a USB port to work. Matrix Orbital supplies it with an external USB cable, which has to be threaded through the rear of the case. It doesn't look very neat, so cut off the cable tie and remove the cable.

Take the provided internal cable and plug the five-pin connector block into the screen's USB header (top right, when you look at the display from behind). It will plug in one way only.

Thread the cable through your spare drive bay and secure the LCD with the provided screws. Now you need to connect the four pins to a spare USB header on your motherboard. Consult your motherboard's manual to find one and read the pin layout. Connect the cables starting from pin one in the following colour order: red, white, green and black. Your hardware installation is now complete.

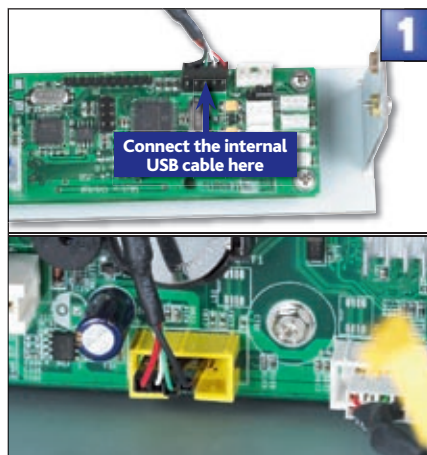
2 When Windows starts, the Found New Hardware Wizard will start. Insert the provided driver CD into your optical drive, select No, Not this time and Click Next. Click Next again and the driver will be installed automatically.

To make the MX630 compatible with MCE you will need to use a third-party program called FrontView, available from www.mediacentermagic.com. This is a free download that will work in trial mode for 30 days with all the options available, but after 30 days you will need to purchase the software for £12 to keep the advanced display customisation options.

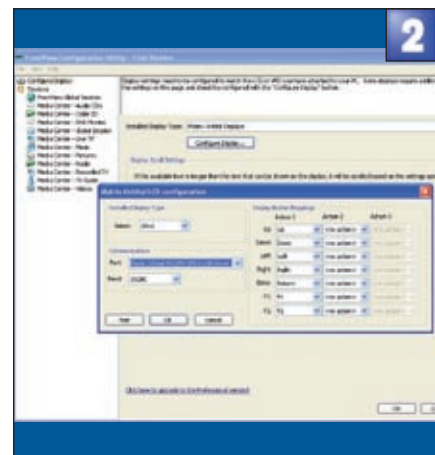
Once you have installed FrontView, run the FrontView configuration program and select Matrix Orbital from the display type. Click the Configure display button to select the correct COM port; you will see Matrix Orbital MX2/MX3/MX6 USB Driver in brackets next to the correct one. When you load

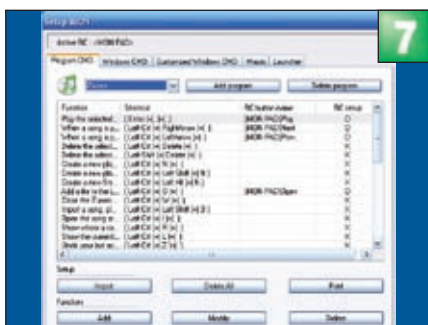
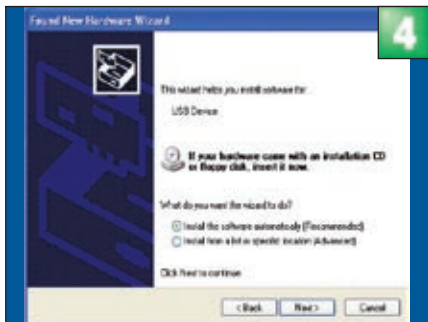
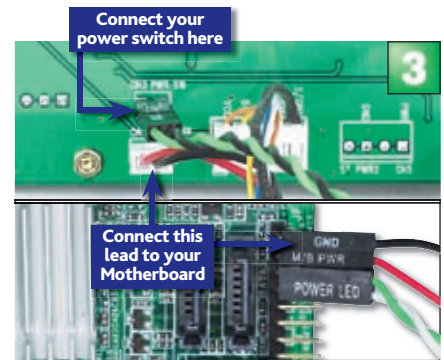


The iMon VFD requires a spare 5¼" bay and can display system information as well as details of your media files



Connect the internal USB cable here





up Media Center, the Matrix Orbital will now show the name of the audio track or DVD chapter that is currently playing.

IMON VFD

1 The iMon VFD is also designed to be installed in a free 5¼" optical drive bay. Slide it loosely into place, but don't screw it in yet, so that you can get easy access to the connections to the back.

There's no USB cable to connect, as it comes with a captive external USB cable, which can be threaded through the back of your case. However, the supplied internal USB adaptor is much neater.

Find a spare USB header on your motherboard and connect the four-pin USB adaptor to it. Consult your motherboard's manual to make sure that you're plugging the cable in the correct way. It should be, starting from pin one: red, white, green and black. The iMon VFD just plugs into this additional internal USB port.

2 Unlike the MX630, the iMon is not powered by the USB connection and has its own separate cable to power the display. The kit comes with a connector that plugs in between your power supply's ATX plug and the ATX socket on your motherboard. The loose lead from the connector plugs into the back of the iMon VFD. The ATX adaptor has 24 pins. If your power supply uses a 20-pin connector, you should make sure the ATX lead from your power supply is plugged into the right pins on the adaptor. The

wires are colour coded, so make sure the wires on the adaptor and the power supply lead match up.

3 As you can use the iMon's remote control to turn your PC on and off, the display also has to be wired between your PC's power button and the power switch headers on the motherboard. As a PC's power switch simply closes the connections between two pins to turn on your computer, it doesn't matter which way round you connect the pins. Unplug the power switch cable from the motherboard and connect it to the pins marked PWR SW on the back of the display. Then take the supplied power cable that comes connected to the M/B PWR pins on the display and plug it into the power switch header on the motherboard. The power switch on the remote will now turn on your PC and shut it down.

4 When you have your display correctly wired, secure it into the 5¼" slot with two or four screws, depending on your case's configuration. When you first turn on your PC, the Windows installation wizard will run to install the USB drivers needed by the display. Point the wizard to the supplied installation CDs and the drivers will install automatically.

5 The iMon VFD's software is supplied on a CD, and you can download updates from Soundgraph's website at www.soundgraph.com. There are three separate applications to control the display. They are all installed during the installation process, so run the setup application from the CD. During installation you will be asked which remote control you have. The iMon VFD is supplied with the iMon Pad remote, so select this when prompted.

The software also requires Windows Media Format 9 Series Runtime files, and these are also automatically installed with the rest of the iMon software. After installation, the iMon Manager will automatically load with Windows. To stop the program popping up whenever Windows starts, tick the Go to tray when started box to make the program resident in your system tray.

6 iMedian supports all the main features of MCE, including CD and DVD playback, audio and video files, an image library and TV recording and playback. iMedian works with all TV cards compatible with the Windows WDM standard. Unlike MCE, iMedian comes with its own DVD codec, so it can play DVDs without any additional software.

To make the iMon VFD work with iMedian, first set the display mode to Auto in the iMon Manager. When you load iMedian, the display will automatically switch to media display mode. The screen will show the names of audio tracks that are playing, but it doesn't display DVD chapter information.

It is also possible to make the iMon VFD work with MCE using FrontView. The software is preconfigured to work with the display, so you just have to select iMon Displays from the display type menu and change to plug-in mode in the VFD control panel. The display will now show the track name of the music file that is currently playing as well as the DVD chapter and elapsed time when you are watching a film in Media Center.

7 The remote control can be used to control any application by adding it to the iMon Manager's program list and loading a remote control configuration file to control the program's functions.

The software comes with configuration files for several popular programs including iTunes and CyberLink's PowerDVD, and you can create your own custom configurations. However, the LCD will not display any information for these other applications. The remote can control any Windows program by using the mouse mode, where the remote's directional control moves the cursor around the screen. **CS**

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